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ABSTRACT

The state of the art in college-level competency testing is described, as is the development of a communication test for the University of Wisconsin-Parkside program. The research described herein exposes the fact that some students have communication problems which could inhibit their learning abilities. Valid and reliable procedures are needed to help students determine and correct speaking and listening deficiencies. To this end, the Communication Competency Assessment Instrument (CCAI) is proposed as a method of assessing these basic, necessary skills. The results of college-level competency testing can be used in various ways. Some suggestions are offered, all with the intention of providing useful information and feedback on students' skill achievement to help them become more effective communicators in college. (Author/GK)

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ASSESSMENT OF COLLEGE-LEVEL SPEAKING AND LISTENING SKILLS

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ASSESSMENT OF COLLEGE-LEVEL SPEAKING AND LISTENING SKILLS

In March 1978, Assessing Functional Communication (Larson, Backlund, Redmond & Barbour, 1978) was published; this text detailed the state of the art in communication competency testing to date. The authors defined a number of main content areas, such as Developmental Language and Communication Skills, Communication Competence and Appropriateness, Receiving--Listening, Anxiety-Apprehension, Interaction Descriptions, etc. A total of 53 of the 90 tests reviewed were appropriate for college level or adult persons. However, no one test provided a comprehensive evaluation of speaking and listening skills; many of the instruments were specialized assessments of competencies such as anxiety, counseling/interviewing techniques, personal maturity, social competence, group interaction, etc.

At this point in time, the University of Wisconsin-Parkside had given up its search for an instrument to assess speaking skills, a skill area which originally had been included in a comprehensive Collegiate Skills Program assessing writing, mathematics, reading, research paper, and library skills--those skills which students should have mastered by the time they have earned 45 credits in college (Maeroff, 1978). The lack of an existing comprehensive assessment instrument in communication and concern over minority bias seemed to be the major reasons for "tabling" the speaking component. With a grant from the University of Wisconsin System (Rubin, 1980a), this author set out to discover the state of the art in college-level competency testing, a prelude to developing a communication test for the UW-Parkside program. Few assessment instruments at the college level were found.

The American College Testing Program's College Outcome Measures Project (COMP) battery provided an assessment of general education knowledge and skills; one of the six areas assessed was labelled "Communicating," the "ability to send and receive information in a variety of modes (written, graphic, oral, numeric and symbolic), within a variety of settings (one-to-one, in small and large groups), and for a variety of purposes (for example, to inform, to understand, to persuade, and to analyze)" (Steele, 1979, p.2). The purpose of the test was to assess effective functioning in adult roles in society. The "Speaking" portion of the Communicating area tended to concentrate on delivery and discourse; the test did include direct measures of speaking ability. However, the Collegiate Skills Program at the University of Wisconsin-Parkside was more concerned with the student's ability to function in college contexts, rather than in society at large.

Also examined was the program at Alverno College, which is more ambitious than most colleges can afford (Alverno College Faculty, 1976). Communication ability is defined as the ability to write, read, speak, listen, use media, and use quantified data. The speaking portion assesses a student's ability to speak extemporaneously, clarify the setting and context, use effective delivery and linguistic conventions, organize and develop ideas, use visual aids, and evaluate one's own strengths and weaknesses. There are six levels which a student might achieve which can be attained in a combination of individualized and group testing sessions and courses. Again, a very ambitious program, but a broad mix of skill areas, some of which are not speaking and listening, per se.

At about this point in time, the Speech Communication Association's 1978 Task Force on Minimal Speaking/Listening Competencies presented the

Minimal Competencies in Speaking and Listening for High School Graduates (Bassett, Whittington, & Staton-Spicer, 1978). This document seemed most appropriate and relevant to my task of creating a college-level assessment instrument. It identifies four main competence areas: Communication Codes (ability to use and understand spoken English and nonverbal signs), Oral Message Evaluation (ability to use appraisal standards to judge oral messages and their effects), Basic Speech Communication Skills (ability to select and arrange message elements to produce spoken messages), and Human Relations (ability to maintain interpersonal relationships). These four main competence areas are then partitioned into 19 specific competencies and examples of application of these for three contexts (occupational, citizenship, and maintenance) are provided. For the conceptual basis of the Communication Competency Assessment Instrument (CCAI) a fourth context was created, "Educational," to be consistent with the framework, and then three application examples for each of the 19 competencies (see Table 1). These three application examples for the 19 competencies were used as the basis for the first version of the CCAI. There were a total of 57 possible assessments to be made about a student's ability to function in specific educational environments: in classrooms, and with instructors, fellow students, and academic advisers.

Table 1 about here

Meanwhile, the Speech Communication Association endorsed and published the Educational Policies Board's "Criteria for Evaluating Instruments and Procedures for Assessing Speaking and Listening" (Backlund, Brown, Gurry, & Jandt, 1979); these were followed in the creation of the CCAI. This document asserts that assessment instruments should be valid, reliable,

and feasible. Specifically, it proposes the following guidelines: stimulus materials should require the demonstration of a skill; inferences about a speaking or listening skill should not be made from tests requiring reading and writing; the instrument should be unbiased; the test should assess skills occurring in familiar situations and in a variety of communication settings; tests should permit a range of acceptable responses; instruments should be standardized so that the test administrator's skills will not affect the results; the stress level should be equal to that of the setting in question; procedures should be practical in terms of cost and time and should involve simple equipment; and assessment should be suitable for the individual's developmental level.

At about the same time, researchers from the University of Oklahoma were in the process of developing a communication assessment instrument to determine a student's admission into the business program at that institution (Scafe & Siler, 1979). They, too, followed the Speech Communication Association's lead on the competency areas, but opted for indirect assessment; that is, a written objective test. Direct assessment procedures were chosen as most applicable for the CCAI procedures.

METHODS

The result was the 57-item version of the CCAI (Rubin, 1980b). There are three main sections to its administration. The first part of the test asks the student to present a 3-minute extemporaneous persuasive talk on a topic of interest during which numerous judgments about a student's speaking ability are made (e.g., volume, rate, clarity, gestures, etc.). Next, the student views a videotaped representation of a class lecture,

and then is immediately asked questions about the lecture and asked to respond in various ways to statements about experiences he/she has had in an educational environment. All student responses to assessment items are either oral or nonverbal in nature; writing and reading abilities are not assessed. The test assesses only the student's ability to communicate through speech and nonverbal actions and to listen. At this stage of development, the CCAI took approximately one hour, per student, to administer.

This version of the test had been subjected to numerous refinements and had been critically examined by a number of persons (Rubin, 1981). Content validity had been achieved by presenting five communication faculty members with the 19 competencies and the 57 assessment items arranged in random order; they were asked to place each assessment item into one of the 19 competency categories. Five questions failed to meet the 80% agreement standard established and were subsequently rewritten and placed into the correct category by all of the evaluators. Refinement of the questions continued and a rating book with 5 levels of proficiency for each of the assessments was constructed, evaluated, and revised. Four faculty members were trained as judges and used the rating book to evaluate three students who had been videotaped earlier while they completed the CCAI. A mean inter-rater correlation of .83 was attained, attesting to the reliability of the rating book. The communication skills of 77 students were assessed with this test version, each test session requiring about one hour of time.

As one might imagine, one hour of testing time per student could be monumental with large-enrollment institutions. Thus, the feasibility of reducing the size of the test was investigated. Coefficient alpha analysis

was performed on the 57-item CCAI. An overall alpha of .83 was achieved. To create a test of approximately one-third the number of assessment items (and one-half the time), the least consistent items were eliminated. That is, for each of the 19 competency areas, the most valid item was determined and the coefficient alpha for this 19-item short form was .79. It is extremely difficult to achieve a .80 coefficient alpha with less than 30 test items (Nunnally, 1978); thus, a .79 is considered respectable. However, to increase the coefficient alpha, four additional items were added to the 19-item short form, the four next highest ranking items, one in each of the four main sections of skills. The coefficient alpha for the 23-item form was .82. Additional testing was then necessary.

Eighty-three students enrolled in the basic communication course at the University of Wisconsin-Parkside completed the 23-item short form during February 1981.[1] A shortened version of the listening videotape stimulus (9:10 to 6:35) was prepared for use which contained the same content of the original but eliminated unnecessary text.[2] All test administrations lasted 30 minutes or less. The data on these 83 students was combined with the data on the first group (77 students) and was again submitted to coefficient alpha analysis. The coefficient alpha for the 23-item test was .80; for the 19-item test, the coefficient alpha was .78. It was determined that the two short forms were sufficiently similar not to warrant the inclusion of the four additional items which, in actuality, had no basis for inclusion. The following results pertain to the 19-item version of the CCAI.

RESULTS

A frequency distribution of total scores on the 19-item test short form is found in Table 2. The theoretical "passing" grade of 3.0 was used as a cut-off point. The program which was proposed at UW-Parkside would declare all those receiving 57 total points (average grade of 3 for 19 items) as "competent;" those above 48 points (2.5 on a 5-point scale) as "in need of remedial self-paced work" and those below 48 points "in need of formal training in a remedial course." The mean, median, and mode fell at about the same point, indicating a somewhat normal curve for the 160 students tested.

Table 2 about here

Initial analyses suggest that the instrument is free from bias. Male and female students did not appear to differ in their abilities to pass the test on the first trial ($\chi^2 = 0.68$, df = 1, n.s.). Similarly, minority (hispanic, black) and non-minority differences were not found ($\chi^2 = 3.33$, df = 1, n.s.). However, there was a significant difference between minority ($\overline{X} = 56.13$) and non-minority ($\overline{X} = 63.74$) students ($t = 3.53$, df = 158, $p < .001$, two-tailed) on their total scores. At first glance, it appears as though the few minority students who did poorly on the test affected the mean of the minority student group (N = 16, s.d. = 9.75) moreso than non-minority students who did not excel (N = 144, s.d. = 8.00). Additionally, the non-random sample of students reflects students who sometimes select the basic communication courses to improve known inadequacies in communication skills. This may have had an influence on the means.

Other data collected on the students, summarized in Table 3, included: Academic Major, Number of College Credits Completed, Age, Grade Point Average, Number of Communication or Speech Courses Taken, and Past Speaking Experience. Briefly, differences were found on the 19-item test for: (a) business and humanities majors; (b) those with 30 or fewer credits and those with over 60 credits; (c) the under-20 age group and the 20-24 age group; (d) those with a low GPA and those with a high GPA, and (e) those with little or no speaking experience and those with quite a bit of experience. Correlations of the raw scores of these data are found in Table 4. These analyses suggest that a variety of experiences and abilities leads to communication competence, as defined by the CCAI. In-depth investigation of these data is in progress.

Table 3 about here

Table 4 about here

Additionally, each of the 19 items of the CCAI short form was closely examined. As seen in Table 5, 11 percent of the students tested had problems asking a question; 33 percent could not organize ideas well; 32 percent could not give accurate directions; 35 percent could not adequately express and defend a point of view; 10 percent didn't understand the difference between a fact and an opinion; 27 percent could not understand suggestions for improvement presented by an instructor; 14 percent could not adequately identify the work to be performed on an assignment when it was presented orally in class; and 49 percent could not describe the point of view of a person who disagreed with them.

Table 5 about here

DISCUSSION

This initial research effort has discovered that some students have communication problems which could very well inhibit their learning abilities. It is imperative that stop-gap measures be developed to help students identify these problems and improve their communication skills so that they will not be disadvantaged learners. The State of Florida (Walker, 1979) is at work on this issue, as is Phil Backlund at Central Washington University. Valid and reliable procedures are needed to help students determine and correct their speaking and listening deficiencies.

Classrooms are communication arenas where students and teachers interact by communicating. Ability to survive in these environments is essential to successful college completion. The CCAI is proposed as a method of assessing these basic survival skills students need. The results of college-level competency testing can be used in a variety of ways.

It may be beneficial to some colleges to establish individualized instruction programs to help students improve specific skill areas. Other colleges may be able to identify specific courses which would help students improve their skills. And still other institutions could use the results to advise students about their weaknesses to help them plan future coursework. Whatever the end result, college-level competency assessment can provide useful information and feedback on students' skill achievement to help them become more effective communicators in their college classes.

FOOTNOTES

[1]This course is required only for Communication majors (Humanities); all other students choose the course as an elective. Extreme gratitude is expressed to Sally Henzl, graduate student at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, for her assistance in this testing process.

[2]Professor Alan M. Rubin staged, directed, and edited the videotape production and Professor Beecham Robinson served as talent for this production. Their assistance in this project is very much appreciated.

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"EDUCATIONAL CONTEXT"

I. Communication Codes

A. LISTEN EFFECTIVELY TO SPOKEN ENGLISH.

1. Understand directions given by a classroom instructor for class assignments.

2. Understand material presented in a class lecture.

3. Understand an instructor's suggestions for improving one's abilities.

B. USE WORDS, PRONUNCIATION AND GRAMMAR APPROPRIATE FOR THE SITUATION.

1. Use appropriate language in a classroom report.

2. Use appropriate grammar when speaking to others.

3. Use pronunciation which is understood by others.

C. USE NONVERBAL SIGNS APPROPRIATE FOR THE SITUATION.

1. Use appropriate gestures and eye contact when interacting with others.

2. Use appropriate facial expressions and tone of voice when conversing with one's instructor or fellow students.

3. Recognize and/or use appropriate gestures, eye contact, and facial expressions when communicating understanding or lack of understanding in a listening situation.

D. USE VOICE EFFECTIVELY.

1. Use appropriate rate when making a report in class.

2. Speak loudly enough to be heard in a classroom situation.

3. Use appropriate clarity when speaking with others.

II. Oral Message Evaluation

A. IDENTIFY MAIN IDEAS IN MESSAGES.

1. Identify the work to be performed when the assignment is given orally in class.

2. Recognize performance standards for work assigned orally in class.

3. Identify the main ideas in a class lecture.

B. DISTINGUISH FACTS FROM OPINIONS.

1. Recognize an opinion in a class lecture or report.

2. Recognize a fact in a class lecture or report.

3. Distinguish between facts and opinions in an interpersonal interaction.

C. DISTINGUISH BETWEEN INFORMATIVE AND PERSUASIVE MESSAGES.

1. Distinguish between informative and persuasive messages in a class report.

2. Distinguish between informative and persuasive messages in a class lecture.

3. Distinguish between informative and persuasive messages in an interpersonal interaction.

D. RECOGNIZE WHEN ANOTHER DOES NOT UNDERSTAND YOUR MESSAGE.

1. Recognize when an instructor or fellow classmate doesn't understand the question you are asking.

2. Recognize when an instructor or fellow classmate doesn't understand the question you are answering.

3. Recognize when others do not understand your explanation of a concept reported on in class.

III. Basic Speech Communication Skills

A. EXPRESS IDEAS CLEARLY AND CONCISELY.

1. Make a clear report on a subject of interest or one you've researched.

2. Concisely explain course requirements to a new student in class.

3. State clearly your reasons for taking a particular course.

B. EXPRESS AND DEFEND WITH EVIDENCE YOUR POINT OF VIEW.

1. Express and defend your view in a classroom report.

2. Express and defend your suggestions for improvements in your school.

3. Express and defend your position that a grade you received was incorrect.

C. ORGANIZE (order) MESSAGES SO THAT OTHERS CAN UNDERSTAND THEM.

1. Use a chronological order to explain your activities throughout the day.

2. Use a topical order to explain a course you took last semester.

3. Use a problem-cause-solution order when discussing with an adviser/counselor an academic problem you are having.

D. ASK QUESTIONS TO OBTAIN INFORMATION.

1. Obtain information about requirements for your major.

2. Obtain information about how to complete an assignment.

3. Obtain suggestions about how to improve your classroom performance.

E. ANSWER QUESTIONS EFFECTIVELY.

1. Answer an instructor's questions about your classroom performance.

2. Answer a question based on a class lecture.

3. Answer a question asked by a classmate about a course you are both taking.

F. GIVE CONCISE AND ACCURATE DIRECTIONS.

1. Direct fellow students in performing unfamiliar tasks or to an unfamiliar location.

2. Instruct a new student on how to do well in college classes.

3. Give accurate and concise directions to others.

G. SUMMARIZE MESSAGES.

1. Summarize oral instructions given by an instructor.

2. Summarize a class lecture.

3. Give a summary of students' suggestions to an instructor.

IV. Human Relations

A. DESCRIBE ANOTHER'S VIEWPOINT.

1. Describe the viewpoint of an instructor who disagrees with your evaluation of your classroom performance.

2. Describe the viewpoint of a fellow student who disagrees with your evaluation of a class you've both taken.

3. Describe the position taken on an issue by an instructor or fellow classmate with which you disagree.

B. DESCRIBE DIFFERENCES IN OPINION.

1. Describe differences in opinion with fellow students about course related issues.

2. Describe differences in opinion about the steps necessary to accomplish your academic or vocational goals.

3. Describe differences of opinion which occurred in a class discussion.

C. EXPRESS FEELINGS TO OTHERS.

1. Express satisfaction or dissatisfaction to an instructor about a course you have taken.

2. Express feelings of satisfaction or dissatisfaction about working with others on group projects for classes.

3. Express empathy to a friend who has not done well on a class assignment or in a course.

D. PERFORM SOCIAL RITUALS.

1. Introduce yourself at the beginning of the semester in class.

2. Request an appointment with a counselor or adviser.

3. Conclude a conversation with an instructor.

TABLE 2

RELATIVE FREQUENCY OF 160 STUDENTS ON THE 19-ITEM SHORT FORM

	Score	Frequency	Standard Deviation	Score on 5-pt. scale
	39	1		
	40	1		
N = 7	44	1		
	45	1		
4.375%	46	1	-2	
	47	2		2.5
	48	1		
	49	3		
N = 33	50	1		
	51	3		
20.625%	52	1		
	53	5		
	54	5		
	55	4	-1	
	56	10		3.0
	57	3		
	58	6		
	59	3		
	60	3		
	61	9		
	62	3		
	* 63	8	$\bar{X}$	
	**			
	*** 64	18		
	65	7		
	66	4		3.5
N = 120	67	8		
	68	6		
75.000%	69	1		
	70	13		
	71	4	+1	
	72	5		
	73	4		
	74	4		
	75	2		
	76	1		4.0
	78	3		
	79	2		
	80	1	+2	
	82	1		
	83	1		

*Mean = 62.98 **Median = 63.78 ***Mode = 64.00

s.d. = 8.475 range = 44.00

TABLE 3

ANALYSIS OF VARIANCE TABLES FOR THE 19-ITEM TOTAL SCORE

	Mean*	N		df	MS	F	p
ACADEMIC MAJOR							
Science	65.50	10	between				
Humanities	65.95_a	39	groups	8	170.31	2.56	.012
Fine Arts	60.80	5					
Behavioral Sci.	65.60	10	within				
Business	59.75_a	44	groups	151	66.61		
Computer/Eng.	67.60	5					
Social Science	69.00	5					
Education	63.00	3	total	159			
Undecided	61.26	39					
COLLEGE CREDITS COMPLETED							
0-15 credits	61.12_a	86	between				
16-30 credits	61.30_b	23	groups	4	390.26	6.14	.0001
31-45 credits	65.00	13	within				
46-60 credits	63.00	12	groups	155	63.61		
Over 60 credits	69.62_{ab}	26	total	159			
AGE							
Under 20	60.88_a	92	between				
20-24	65.53_a	36	groups	4	252.50	3.76	.006
25-29	64.73	11	within				
30-39	67.54	13	groups	155	67.17		
Over 39	65.88	8	total	159			
GRADE POINT AVERAGE (4-pt. scale)							
Under 2.00	59.42_a	24	between				
2.00--2.49	63.39	23	groups	4	223.10	3.72	.007
2.50--2.99	64.12	42	within				
3.00--3.49	67.50_a	28	groups	122	59.96		
3.50--4.00	65.90	10	total	126			
COMMUNICATION COURSES							
None	61.01	71	between				
1	63.12	49	groups	5	841.89	2.45	.036
2	64.58	19	within				
3	67.70	10	groups	154	68.69		
4	66.83	6					
5 or more	69.40	5	total	159			
PAST SPEAKING EXPERIENCE							
None	61.06_{ab}	49	between				
Classes other than speech	60.35_c	26	groups	5	326.68	5.14	.0002
Speech Classes	62.28_d	46	within				
Some Experience outside of speech class	66.52_a	25	groups	154	63.56		
Good amount outside class	72.50_{bcd}	10	total	159			
A lot outside class	65.75	4					

*Means with a common letter in the subscript differ at or beyond the .05 level of confidence utilizing the Tukey-B procedure.

TABLE 4

CORRELATIONS OF DEMOGRAPHIC VARIABLES AND THE 19-ITEM SHORT FORM

	CC	Age	GPA	CCC	SE	Race	Sex
Credits Completed							
Age	.34***						
Grade Point Average[1]	.31***	.29**					
Communication Courses Completed	.34***	.19*	.11				
Speaking Experience	.21**	.15	.06	.58***			
Race[2]	-.04	-.02	-.32***	-.06	-.02		
Sex[3]	-.08	.18*	.02	.06	.07	-.01	
19-Item Short Form	.35***	.21**	.28**	.28***	.31***	-.27***	-.02

*p < .05 **p < .01 ***p < .001

[1] 33 students had no GPA accumulated; they were labelled "missing" for this analysis. N = 127 for all GPA correlations. For all other correlations, N = 160.

[2] For the Race variable, 0 = Non-minority, 1 = Minority.

[3] For the Sex variable, 0 = Male, 1 = Female.

TABLE 5

PERCENTAGE OF STUDENTS' SCORES ON A 5-POINT SCALE
FOR THE 19-ITEM SHORT FORM

	lowest				highest
Item	1	2	3	4	5
Pronunciation	1.2%	0.0%	14.4%	47.5%	36.9%
Facial Expr./Tone of Voice	0.0	9.4	29.4	41.2	20.0
Speech Clarity	1.2	15.0	36.2	43.1	4.4
Persuasive/Inform. Distinct.	5.0	20.6	30.6	31.9	11.9
Clarity of Ideas	1.9	12.5	36.9	39.4	9.4
Express & Defend Pt. of View	7.5	27.5	38.7	18.1	8.1
Recognize Non-Understanding	3.1	2.5	23.7	46.2	24.4
Fact/Opinion Distinction	4.4	5.6	23.7	61.2	5.0
Listening (Understand Suggestions)	5.0	22.5	47.5	20.6	4.4
Identify Main Ideas	3.7	10.0	38.1	28.7	19.4
Summarize	8.1	7.5	36.9	22.5	25.0
Social Ritual	1.9	10.6	30.0	40.6	16.9
Ask Questions	1.9	9.4	37.5	34.4	16.9
Answer Questions	1.2	8.7	55.6	26.9	7.5
Express Feelings	5.6	29.4	19.4	31.9	13.7
Organize Ideas	20.6	12.5	39.4	26.2	1.2
Give Directions	12.5	20.0	30.0	20.6	16.9
Describe Another's View	17.5	31.3	28.7	18.8	3.7
Describe Diff. in Opinion	14.4	30.0	34.4	16.9	4.4